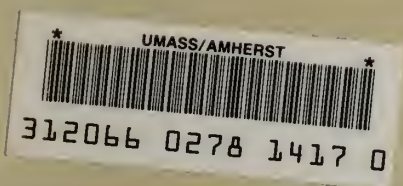


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An Occasional Paper

**Did the Media Serve Us Well?: A Critic's View of
Coverage of Ross Perot's 1992 Presidential Campaign**

by

Peter Ajemian, Visiting Fellow (1994 - 1995)

December 1995

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University of Massachusetts
Boston

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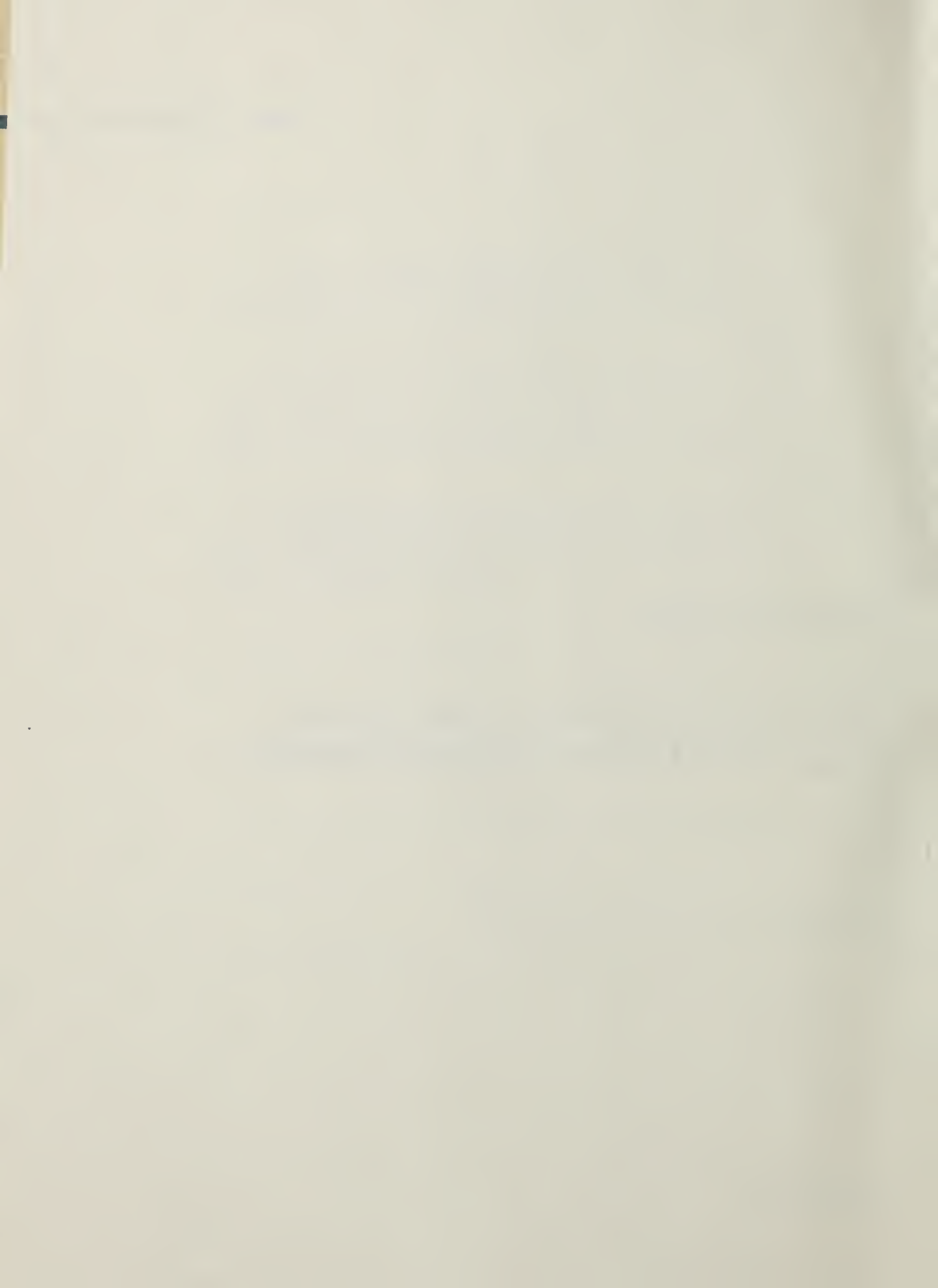
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I. Executive Summary

Colin Powell's Nov. 8th announcement that he would not run for president in 1996 raises a question: What was the meaning of the enormous amount of coverage the media devoted *for months* to the *mere possibility* of Powell running?

After all, the Powell coverage, was, in many ways, a much more prominent and overwhelming outpouring of attention than that given to "possible candidates" during the early phase of past presidential races. News organizations for six months engaged in non-stop speculation about Powell even though Powell kept saying only that he'd think about running when he completed his book tour. News managers made Powell, the noncandidate, the subject of a remarkably high number of lead stories in newspapers and news magazines and on television news. The coverage illustrated a troubling trend in the news business.

The media's speculation about what Powell *might* do was driven by a desire to entertain people rather than a desire to inform them of important facts. While it may be unsurprising that a news organization would dwell on an exciting "what if?" story, it is worth noting what is different about this coverage. All these hundreds of speculative stories were presented as "news" to the American people, when, in fact, they contained virtually no news. Why is that? It's all part of a disturbing trend in television news in recent years to blur the lines between news and entertainment.

When television news divisions loosen their criteria in defining what stories to air, two outcomes occur: 1) With a broader, more vague definition of news, more "dramatic" or "entertaining" stories are aired and fewer *actual news stories* make it on the air; and, 2) The substantive, factual parts of stories take on a diminished weight and status. When that happens

regularly, we're more vulnerable to misinformation and distortion because it's harder to sift through everything. At the very least, we have a "chicken and egg" problem; for example, was the country talking about Colin Powell because the news media decided to hype the story or was the media reporting on a real grass roots phenomenon?

We got a taste of how this phenomenon can impact presidential politics in 1992, when the press heaped undeserved coverage on Ross Perot and, in doing so, helped increase his standing in polls, which, in turn, prompted the press to then anoint him prematurely as the front-runner.

The media's ever-growing emphasis on offering entertainment to its viewers at the expense of actual news greatly influenced the coverage of Perot, especially in Phase 1 of his campaign. This outlook led the media to devote most of its coverage of Perot to **speculative** aspects of his candidacy and very little to realities about the man, his record, positions and character. It was also easier to speculate because Perot didn't do or say much as a non-candidate.

It is helpful to consider some central questions about the 1992 coverage. For example: Why did Perot receive so much media coverage in the spring of 1992 given that he never announced his candidacy? Why was he taken so seriously given his lack of any experience in elective office?

How could Perot have been taken so seriously when he appeared so casual and uncertain about being president and didn't say or do much to suggest he was serious? Why wasn't he held much more accountable for having no positions on many issues for his entire non-campaign?

How could the media devote such an enormous amount of time and space to Perot and tell us so little about his basic character, including the capacity for paranoia and fabrication that he exhibited so glaringly in the ten days before the November election?

Why did Perot receive such enormous media attention for his finish in polls and exit polls, given they are manufactured, hypothetical projections? How could Perot - only days after his "withdrawal" on July 16 - openly allow or encourage his volunteers in various states to keep his name on the ballot without reporters raising more questions about this contradictory action rather than just relaying the news? How could Perot announce in July that he wasn't running because: 1) the Democratic Party had been revitalized, and, 2) he couldn't win anyway and he didn't want to see the election decided in the US House - without both those claims receiving more scrutiny and criticism?

How could Perot re-enter the race on October 1 and not be scrutinized for contradicting the reasons he cited in his July decision to not run? How could he choose Admiral James Stockdale as his running mate without Stockdale receiving more scrutiny regarding his readiness to potentially replace the president of the U.S.?

This paper will attempt to provide at least a partial answer to these questions

Clearly, the complete answer would involve a complex combination of factors; however, the simplest "summary " explanation for Perot's emergence as a major candidate boils down to one fact: *Perot rose in the polls and the media covered that as if he were winning primary votes and demonstrating his ability to lead the nation.*

Consider that: a) The three television networks did six stories covering Perot in March, 1992; 22 stories in April; 47 stories in May and 74 stories in June;¹ and, b) Perot's poll standing began to show at the 20 percent level at the beginning of April and then kept rising until June, when he was ahead of Bush and Clinton. Consider, also, that this quick jump in coverage came

even though Perot was doing and saying little from late February until July to advance his candidacy.

Yes, the media was aware of Perot's billionaire status and his knack for supplying catchy phrases that conveyed the public's frustrations with government. But Perot spent only a small part of his money during the first few months of his undeclared campaign when he made his rapid climb in polls.

Without media coverage of his standing in polls, Perot would have gone nowhere. Luckily for him, the media, particularly television, was far more interested in the entertainment and drama supplied by his "horse race" status and sound bites than in informing the voters about who he really was and what he really stood for.

Certainly, the flood of phone calls to Perot's headquarters and the impressive turnout of volunteers who helped to place Perot on state ballots were worthy of some news coverage, but the press should have taken a slower, more balanced, more restrained approach with Perot, a totally untested candidate. Given that Perot did not enter any primaries, which would have tested his strength, the press should have tried to examine Perot by at least a few criteria besides polls - such as his positions, his background, his speeches, his preparation, and his knowledge of domestic and foreign affairs. The press gave so much weight and legitimacy to Perot's poll standings that it was as if he had won real votes. Indeed, with this reporting in 1992, the press took a giant step toward further blurring public perceptions of real votes and public opinion polls.

In the last nine days before the election, Perot, in a self-inflicted blow to his credibility, appeared on *60 Minutes* and made charges he could not prove about a Republican plot to sabotage his daughter's wedding. But, by then, with the election only days away, millions of

Americans didn't absorb the full impact of the story's ramifications. If the media had done a better job and stuck to its traditional role, people would have learned more about Perot much earlier, and we would all have been better served.

II. Introduction: The News Media's Increasing Emphasis on Entertaining Rather than Informing its Audience Is Affecting Coverage of Presidential Campaigns

In 1992, television news was growing more and more entertainment-oriented. The news media's reaction to Oliver North's 1987 testimony before the US Congress regarding the Iran-Contra scandal provided a large clue about the trends coming in the news business. The press spent much time discussing North's popular appeal, how well he had "performed," and how handsome he looked in his Marine uniform and not enough time on the troubling content of his testimony and the reality of what North and the Reagan administration had done. Since then, other episodes have broken new ground in bringing entertainment and sensationalism into news coverage. For example, the networks chose to show us Anita Hill's 1991 testimony live for a few days during the Clarence Thomas hearings largely because of the sexual harassment component. Television showed us the 1992 Rodney King beating in Los Angeles not once or twice, but hundreds of times simply because the footage was shocking and unusual. TV news kept telling us again and again about allegations of abuse against Michael Jackson.

Television news reported on the Nancy Kerrigan saga in 1993 with such urgency and excess that it was as if an international crisis had erupted. In fact, CBS News Co-anchor Connie Chung reported live from Tonya Harding's skating rink for nearly two weeks even though there was no major change in the story. Even the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* ran an average of two stories a day a day on the Kerrigan/Harding affair during the month after Kerrigan was attacked.²

Then, of course, came the OJ Simpson murder case, which shattered any previous boundaries for defining what constitutes "daily news." As of June, 1995, a year after the 1994 murder, the three networks' evening newscasts had spent more than twice as much time on the Simpson case than they had

spent on the next most covered story, which was the uprising in Haiti, leaving the Oklahoma City bombing story and Bosnia far behind.³

The coverage of these episodes confirmed the arrival of a new premise for TV network news: *If a story is entertaining, you can keep covering it to excess. It doesn't matter if the story impacts only a few people or lacks national urgency.*

"The real sea change in American journalism over the last decade," wrote author Neal Gabler, "and the one the Simpson coverage dramatically illustrated - has been the extent to which the story function in the news has eroded the information function. Where once the network evening news routinely reported items of national and international import and little else, sordid tales and feature stories now as often as not shoulder aside that hard news."⁴

One can quickly apply Gabler's point to the Ross Perot story in 1992. The ingredients of the Perot "story" were fantastic: a charismatic, self-made billionaire who spoke in natural sound bites who was inviting the people to put him on the ballot in 50 states. But the "information" available about Perot's real life - his past, his record, his character and his experience that did or didn't prepare him to be president - wasn't as compelling to news managers. It didn't take much reporting to find out, for instance, that Perot had left some serious controversy behind during different phases of his career. However, from a market standpoint, it was in the interests of news organizations to keep the "story" alive and less of a priority to fill in the blanks about who Perot really was.

We've all become used to news divisions devoting more and more time to stories that have the most drama or conflict while sometimes giving minimal attention to important news stories that lack those characteristics.

Lesley Stahl of CBS News, during a 1994 panel discussion convened by the *New York*

Times magazine said:

"...One of the reasons why there's so much 'tabloid news' in the mainstream is because the public wants it. News judgments are being made on the basis of polls. For the last 20 years, we've been heading more and more in that direction, and not just the networks, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the newspapers: Everybody is asking, "What does the public want?"⁵

When television news shows tailor their content to polls and ratings in this fashion, less and less time is devoted to providing useful information to the public about what's happening.

Former *Washington Post* reporter Carl Bernstein, speaking in 1991 to a Harvard audience, noted that "the day that the Trump divorce hit the front pages and led many of the tabloids was the same day that the unification of Germany occurred and that Nelson Mandela returned to Soweto. And yet, in many papers, the great story of that day was the Trump divorce...."⁶

When the overall content of a TV newscast becomes more entertainment-oriented, factual content becomes less important. In fact, seeking and reporting the truth has become a lower priority in today's news business. It's a new world in television news - a world where "tabloid" news shows are now permanent fixtures; a world where NBC anchor Tom Brokaw greets viewers by reading the headlines of the day's top stories as if trying to "grab" viewers; a world where the success of cable television and other market forces have left news divisions scrambling to compete and make money for their network.

"The need in recent years for television news to serve as a profit center also has created pressure to treat politics and public affairs more as entertainment than serious business," said a

report titled *"Campaign Lessons for '92,"* published in November, 1991 by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics & Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Politicians adapt to changes in the news industry every four years. For example, the greater frequency of appearances by presidential candidates in 1992 on television interview shows has people predicting that candidates will do even more of this in 1996.

The following are three central trends in coverage that affected the 1992 campaign and the coverage of Ross Perot:

**** The media, especially television, spend a tremendous amount of time covering the horse race, meaning polls, strategy, expectations and the "game" of politics.**

This trend is certainly not new, but it remains dominant.

Every four years, people inside and outside of the news media agree that the coverage includes too many poll stories, but then, in the next election, the press repeats the pattern, saturating the air waves and newspaper pages with one poll story after another. Two reasons for this are: 1) reporters and editors assigned to cover daily news from the campaign trail almost always view the latest poll results as "news," and, 2) newspapers and television networks believe the public likes hearing these results, which they perceive as the story of "who's winning?"

The number of polls has increased every four years. In 1992, for example, more than 200 media polls were conducted between July and Election Day alone.⁷ Almost one half of CNN's campaign coverage and a bit more than one third of ABC's coverage contained horse race information.⁸ In 1988, of the more than 7,000 stories analyzed in 18 news outlets between Labor Day and Election Day, more than 57 percent were devoted to the horse race and to conflicts

between the candidates; only 20 percent of the stories dealt with qualifications and fewer than 10 percent dealt with issues.⁹

"Scholars have looked at levels of substance in campaign news for a long time," said Richard Noyes, Political Studies Director at the Center for Media & Public Affairs in Washington D.C. "Every time they've checked, they've found that 20 - 30 percent is about policy issues, candidate qualifications and other substantive (matters). That leaves about two thirds of all campaign news that has little or no relationship to the substance of the campaign."¹⁰

Indeed, there is a long history of the news media focusing on "who's ahead?" rather than "what kind of president do we want?"

This - the most predictable, deeply-entrenched "tradition" of modern campaign coverage - enormously benefited Perot, whose campaign rested almost entirely on his movement in polls.

**** The news media has shown less and less interest in candidates' daily campaigning.**

The 1988 campaign, dominated by warring photo opportunities and sound bites, helped show Americans the extensive effort that presidential candidates make to get on the television news. When candidates began devoting more and more time to "media events" and performing rituals like touching down in the airports of different cities merely to get covered in that media market, it signified the extent to which image had prevailed over substance. Unfortunately, while many voters have grown accustomed to this routine, they've felt more distance from campaigns and candidates.

In the 1992 presidential campaign, people saw and heard less from the candidates and more from television correspondents who tried to interpret the candidates' actions for us. The

average sound bite of a candidate speaking on the news had shrunk to less than ten seconds. The television news media, aware of campaigns trying to simply create pictures for the news, has stopped covering daily events as closely. This change has influenced candidates to schedule more superficial events and photo-opportunities than lengthy speeches.

This trend was extremely helpful to Ross Perot, who didn't wage a daily campaign. The press didn't care as much as about Perot's inactivity as perhaps it would have years ago.

**** In recent presidential elections, the press has played an increasingly large role in trying to report on and "screen" the character of candidates.**

This new practice was most noticeably evident during the early stages of the 1988 campaign, when two candidates - Gary Hart and Joseph Biden - withdrew from the race after the press reported on incidents that raised questions about their character. Also that year, the press gave George Bush's running mate, Dan Quayle, a harsh greeting by aggressively reporting on his statements about his time in the National Guard. In 1992, the media's choices about how to treat allegations of infidelity in Bill Clinton's past were critical in determining how Clinton emerged from the pack among his Democratic challengers.

Anyone who enters the presidential race in 1996 can expect their past will be examined, and that includes behavior, actions, statements, that pertain to one's character.

Perot avoided a lot of this scrutiny because, first, he didn't run in the primaries, and, second, as an undeclared candidate, he chose to be inaccessible to the press for most of 1992. The press, meanwhile, was very slow in starting its aggressive, substantive reporting on him.

III. Throughout the 1992 campaign, the press coverage of Ross Perot focused on *what might happen* more than *what is happening*.

A. The media treated Perot like a major candidate even though he never announced his candidacy or behaved like a serious candidate.

Perot Never Announced His Candidacy, But It Didn't Matter

Never before in history has an undeclared "possible" candidate for president received as much media attention as Ross Perot. Most American voters probably couldn't recall that Perot was *officially* a presidential candidate for only *one month* at the end of the 1992 campaign. The reason is that the media heaped generous attention on Perot, the noncandidate, from March until July, 1992. A review of print and television coverage during that period includes numerous examples of the media's "premature" elevation of Perot's status. For example, when he announced in July that he was not running, headlines described his "quitting," when, in fact, he had never begun to run.

First, one has to consider the relevant history. Certainly, news organizations often have devoted occasional stories to speculating about possible candidates, but usually they've waited until a person formally announces a candidacy before beginning regular, serious, thorough coverage. Large daily newspapers such as the *New York Times* or *Boston Globe* in the past have waited until a candidate's formal announcement before running a good-sized profile article.

In 1976, for example, there were sporadic stories about whether Hubert Humphrey would jump into the race for the Democratic nomination. In 1979, the press wrote many stories on whether US Sen. Edward Kennedy would run against President Jimmy Carter in 1980, but, it wasn't until after Kennedy got in the race in the fall that scrutiny of Kennedy heightened. In 1988 and 1992, many stories appeared on whether New York Governor Mario Cuomo would enter the

race. Yet, with these and many more examples - including even the most popular, "heavyweight" politicians like Cuomo - the media has always stayed within its own natural boundaries until candidates make it official.

With Perot, the press didn't set the same kind of limits. Only a few weeks after Perot's Feb. 20, 1992 appearance on *Larry King Live*, when he said he might run if people placed his name on state ballots in all 50 states, newspapers and television networks began to cover Perot as if he were already in the race. Often the only distinction between Perot and other candidates was that he was called an "undeclared candidate" in a reference or two, or, a story speculated when he might make his "expected announcement." That labeling continued all spring, and, in fact, by May, Perot was leading in polls and being portrayed as a front-runner.

What made the dynamics more remarkable was that Perot was openly uncertain and casual about whether and when he was going to announce his candidacy. In his March 18th speech in Washington D.C., for example, Perot said:

"So right now, to my amazement, and I guess everybody's amazement, there are people at work in 50 states on their own initiative. Now, will it happen? I don't know."¹¹

On occasion, he said he "had no desire to be president," but would run if the people wanted him to. As late as May 1, 1992, he was quoted as saying that if Lloyd Bentsen were running for president, he wouldn't run. Even later, Perot was quoted this way in the May 25th edition of *Time*:

Time: "The official announcement is just a formality, then?"

Perot: "No, no, no. Tomorrow something could come up and everybody might say let's drop it. This is driven from the bottom up...." The (opposition's) strategy now is to try to get the American people to drop it."¹²

On July 16, the day he announced he was not running, Perot said: "I don't have any drive to be President of the United States."¹³ In fact, in a Aug. 13, 1995 edition of NBC's *Meet the Press*, Perot said he had "never been interested in public life" and that being in the White House "is my worst nightmare."

Perot Didn't Offer Positions on Issues, But it Didn't Matter

Perot's undeclared status helped him in more ways than one. While he received a wave of publicity, his lack of positions did not attract prominent criticism until later, when he had achieved front-runner status. For example, in the April 27, 1992 *Newsweek*, which ran a cover story and interview with Perot, the magazine asked Perot: *"Your proposals have been somewhat vague."* Perot replied: *"Everybody wants a position on everything from frogs to mosquitoes to the deficit. If I'm a candidate, I'll give you guys all that. But I'm not going to do it yet. I want to it well. And if I'm not a candidate, I don't have to do it."*¹⁴

This was one of many times that members of the news media or Perot himself acknowledged openly that were he an official candidate, he'd receive more scrutiny. On an April 23rd *Nightline*, ABC's Ted Koppel, introducing a question to a reporter, said of Perot:

He's gotten a fairly easy ride so far precisely because he's not a candidate yet, and he's new, and it's kind of fresh and it's interesting, and he's colorful, and he talks in interesting sound bites. How does he respond when the searchlight gets a little brighter, or the microscope is cranked up to a higher degree of magnification? Does he respond well to that kind of investigation?"¹⁵

Then, during the same show, correspondent David Marash said: "Right now, all most Americans know about Perot is that he is an alternative... One reason Americans know so little

about what a President Perot might do is he has tended to turn aside all questions about that, and when reporters have tried to tug at his bridle, Perot has balked and kicked."

Even by June and July, when Perot had peaked in publicity and polls, he still did not have a set of positions on issues. A June 14th AP story reported that Perot was still trying to formulate his positions and that "a daily parade of environmentalists and economists, health care and homeless advocates" were visiting his aides at his Dallas offices. On July 15th, on the eve of his "withdrawal," Ted Koppel was asking a guest why Perot could still not have positions.

Only a small portion of coverage of Perot on ABC and CNN in 1992 focused on issues, according to Matthew Kerbel, a Villanova political science professor who conducted a study of the 1992 coverage. "...For the man who claimed he wanted to run for president because the other candidates were not addressing the hard questions, his absence from this aspect of campaign coverage was glaring,"¹⁶ Kerbel wrote. In fact, Perot was either the subject or object of no more than 6 percent of the stories covering economic issues of the stories that mentioned presidential candidates.¹⁷

Perot Didn't Campaign, But it Didn't Matter

From his February announcement on *Larry King Live*, until he bowed out, Perot made only a handful of appearances before real audiences. During Phase 1 of his campaign, he said and did little but to make a few stops in states where his volunteers had put him on the ballot.

Tom Rosenstiel, in his book on '92 coverage, said:

"By the time Perot dropped out July 17, his campaign would consist of two press conferences, and twelve or thirteen public appearances - plus hours of TV interviews. Most reporters had virtually no contact with him and had rarely seen him interact with anyone in person."¹⁸

For long periods, apparently, reporters hung out in Dallas waiting and hoping Perot would do something. Matthew Kerbel reported in his book: "All this led to media frustration, but...it did not diminish the amount of attention television paid to Ross Perot. In early summer when Perot 1 was at its height, the candidate would plunge from sight for long periods of time and still receive more press than the nominees of the two major parties."

Kerbel pointed out the benefits of being "the only candidate portrayed in terms of the people who endorsed him, his volunteers or grassroots supporters." He added, however, that "stylistically, Perot stories bore the familiar tone of election news. But so often they were content-free, even by television's standards...."

Yet, despite Perot's not committing to run, not having positions and not campaigning, the television news media gave him more favorable coverage than other candidates. The "Democracy '92" study of election coverage found that from February 1 to June 4, "the beneficiary of the attention of the three networks was...Ross Perot, who received more favorable coverage than Bush, Buchanan or Brown on all four networks (including CNN) and more positive coverage than Clinton on the three broadcast networks. The novelty of Perot's campaign during the waning days of the primary and caucus season apparently occasioned far better news for him than for the bulk of his would-be competitors."¹⁹

Perot Was Guest on TV Shows Despite His Speculative Status

Following his Feb. 20, 1992 debut with Larry King, in March, Perot was in demand to appear on television interview shows partly because of his capacity to draw good ratings. The

producers didn't seem to care much about Perot's uncertain status as a candidate, his lack of any experience in elective office or any demonstration of a readiness to be president.

In March, Perot appeared on quite a few interview shows, including, for example, *The Phil Donahue Show*, ABC's *Good Morning America* and *CBS This Morning*. The network news shows ran six stories on Perot in March and generally approached him in a friendly fashion.

The ultimate example of this "free" exposure was CBS' *60 Minutes* segment on Perot that aired on March 29, 1992 - only a few weeks after his vague "maybe" announcement on Larry King's show. Co-host Morley Safer began the *60 Minutes* segment like this:

It's no idle fantasy. When H. Ross Perot is willing to spend \$100 million of his own money to run for President, he must be taken seriously. He says if enough people sign petitions to put him on the ballot in all 50 states, he'll run as an independent next November. Already more than a million people have called his 800 number, pledging support. There were 56,000 calls an hour last Wednesday alone. Can an independent possibly become president? Well, to quote *the Wall Street Journal*, this is a "screwy year," a year in which the outrage expressed by a crusty, self-made billionaire might just catch fire.

Other excerpts:

"...These volunteers are fielding calls from all over the country demanding that Ross Perot take the White House away from the politicians.

"Perot says he doesn't want to be president, but, if enough people ask, he'll serve, for free. He's a man who's always played by his own rules. When two employees were imprisoned by Iran, he launched a private commando raid headed by retired Colonel Bull Simon. Burt Lancaster played Simon in the movie.

"...And what Americans love most of all is a maverick, an untamed cowpoke, willing to ride in and clean up the town, especially one who's willing to blow \$100 million to get hired for a job he says he doesn't really want.²⁰

Getting this sort of treatment from *60 Minutes*, one of the best-rated, most credible shows on television, is highly unusual for a presidential candidate - but, for a *potential* candidate, it was

unprecedented. Given that Perot was then only flirting with a candidacy, it's clear that CBS decision-makers viewed the segment primarily as an entertainment piece.

The average rating for NBC's *Today Show*, for example, was 3.8 - which represents 921,000 households for each point. Perot's two-hour appearance on June 11 drew a rating of 6.0 - the show's highest rating since the Gulf War.²¹

UCLA Professor John Zaller, in a 1995 article, reported on his research into why television executives wanted Perot to appear as a guest on these television shows in March, 1992.

Two excerpts stated:

"...Perhaps the most frequently invoked value was something like "what the public is interested in" or "the biggest story going," which are close functional equivalents of concern about ratings. There was, on the other hand, scarcely any explicit concern about Perot's long-term political viability, which, as noted earlier, is the principal determinant of the amount of coverage the conventional press allocates to presidential candidates."

"Perot's history of lively appearances on interview programs rather than any ground swell of public enthusiasm that could yet be visible to them" led producers to attempt to get Perot on their shows.²²

During this first round of shows, Perot, acting in the role of "celebrity" more than "presidential candidate," was able to talk in vague, loose terms about his possible candidacy.

Consider, for example, this excerpt from a March 20th CBS Evening News "introductory" piece:

Dan Rather, anchor:

"There is a man in Texas who says he's mad as hell about what's going on in Washington and he just might not take it anymore. He's thinking about running for President as an Independent - says he might even name a running mate as early as Monday."

James Hattori reporting:

H. Ross Perot: .."In plain Texas talk, it's time to take out the trash and clean out the barn before it's too late."

Hattori: "Ross Perot, the maverick Texan who shoots from the lip, often hitting the Washington establishment. His exploits have given an almost heroic appeal: building a multi-billion dollar business from the ground up; championing the cause of Vietnam Vets and POWs; hiring commandos to rescue two of his workers taken hostage in Iran. Now while he hasn't exactly thrown his Stetson into the presidential ring, he is two-stepping around it. What would it take to get you to run?"

Perot: "If ordinary people, acting on their own initiative, put me on the ballot, then I have told them I would run, and I will."

Hattori: "After years of saying no, Perot has opened the door to politics in hopes of spurring a grass roots uprising."

Perot: "The country doesn't work anymore. We have a system in gridlock in Washington. Look, here's Congress, here's the White House - all they do is fight all day. I feel strongly that government in this country should come from the people. Today, we have a government that comes at the people from Washington."²³

By the time the campaign was over, tallies showed that from Jan. 1 to Nov. 3, 1992, Perot appeared on 33 television talk shows, including six appearances on *Larry King Live*, 15 on the *Today Show*, and 7 on *CBS This Morning*. Clinton, incidentally, made 47 appearances on television talk shows and President Bush made 16.²⁴

- B. The media grossly over-reacted to Perot's standing in polls by treating it as the most important component of his undeclared candidacy. The distortion that resulted created an aura of legitimacy, strength and seriousness that were never there.**
- 1. Background: Poll results are "manufactured" projections that should never be covered much, and, if and when they attract coverage, it should be with constraints, qualifications, and explanations to the public about their meaning.**

No one disputes that polls are omnipresent during a presidential campaign. Most accept that polls influence the evolution of individual campaigns, and some argue that they regularly alter the outcome of elections. But what citizens are less aware of is the degree to which polls influence how news organizations do their job. Polls often drive the coverage, affecting which candidates get attention and the approach taken in covering them. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a scholar and expert on campaign discourse, wrote: "...polls also shape the nouns, verbs and adverbs that reporters choose to characterize a candidate's discourse and behavior."²⁵

It is important to keep in mind what polls, in essence, are about. For example:

- A poll is only a "snapshot" - an attempt to measure attitudes at a given moment in time. Because attitudes are constantly changing, a poll is an attempted measurement of a moving target. (And, some would argue, it's an attempt to scientifically measure something that can't be measured this way. As one writer put it, "an election, after all, remains the real thing and a poll, however scientific, a simulation."²⁶)

- Individuals responding to pollsters bring all kinds of different experiences, attitudes, and biases to bear before they even answer. Some might voice temporary support or opposition to a candidate, for instance as a way of venting feelings, when, in fact, the response doesn't mean they're likely to actually vote for or against that person.

- Trial heat "horse race" polls that ask people how they'd vote "if the election were held today" are particularly prone to inaccuracy and distortion because of the likelihood that circumstances will change in that contest that could change people's sentiments before the election.

- A poll is "manufactured news." It is conducted alone, and, unreported, influences absolutely no one. It's like a tree falling in a forest with no one there.

- Poll data can and does contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies. If the media doesn't cover a candidate due to his low poll standing, he is unlikely to win. If the media does cover someone, his name recognition and poll standing increases, and he'll get more coverage.

- Just because a candidate receives high poll ratings, doesn't mean the people know a lot about that candidate or that he is best-qualified for the office he seeks, including the presidency.

- Polls, particularly the earliest polls, have been very inaccurate forecasting the outcome of presidential primaries and elections, just decreasing their value. (For example, remember Ted Kennedy led President Carter in polls during most of 1979? Mike Dukakis 17 points ahead of Bush in 1988?

As Dayton Duncan, former campaign press secretary to 1988 Democratic nominee

Michael Dukakis, wrote in a 1989 report:

"Nothing happens" when you take a poll. "...Poll news is not a 'pseudo-event' created by the campaigns, it is pseudo-news created by the media." "At best, it reflects how the population rate the campaign at a given moment or explains why candidates and their campaigns are doing some of the things they are doing. But at its core, it doesn't report anything real. Polls are just representative samplings of ephemeral opinion."²⁷

Peter Hart, veteran pollster who conducts polls for NBC News & the Wall St.

Journal, agreed, in an interview, that "a poll is pseudo-news. It is not a real event - like an air strike over Bosnia or a vote..."²⁸

2. Now, after considering these flaws and limitations of polls, consider that Ross Perot was a poll-created, poll-based, poll-dependent candidate.

His candidacy hinged on polls and media coverage of polls more than any other presidential candidate in history. All Perot had was his movement in polls, which the media chose to magnify to an extraordinary degree. Apparently, Paul Friedman, Executive Producer of ABC's *World News Tonight*, was one who saw Perot somewhat in this context during the early period up until April or so. Tom Rosenstiel reports in his book that Friedman resisted attempts by others at ABC to persuade him to devote more attention to Perot until the network ran its first story on Perot on April 20th. "He (Perot) hasn't put himself on the line," Friedman said at one point. "It is all polling data."²⁹

By the time of the New York primary, the media, particularly television, were ready to pounce all over the Perot story - regardless of how speculative it was - partly because it appeared the public was dissatisfied with Bush and Clinton, who had emerged as the two likely nominees.

So, it was not a coincidence that suddenly the Voter Research & Survey Group, the consortium of the three networks and CNN, decided at this particular time to add a question on Perot to its primary exit poll survey for the April 7th New York Primary. From then until the June 2nd California primary, the consortium included either one or both of the following questions:

- a) If these were the presidential candidates in November, who would you vote for?
-- George Bush -- Bill Clinton -- Ross Perot
- b) If Ross Perot had been on the Democratic(or Republican) ballot, would you have voted for him? -- Yes -- No ³⁰

As it turned out, the press produced many, many stories on Perot's totals in these exit polls, especially in California. (See page 32 of this paper.)

While the three television networks had aired only six stories on Perot prior to the New York Primary, from April 7 to May 15 they aired 26 Perot stories, according to the *Media Monitor* of the Center for Media & Public Affairs. Since the end of the Los Angeles riots, the networks devoted more time on the news to Perot (28 minutes) than to Clinton (27 minutes). In addition, this "rise to prominence," as the newsletter called it, was accompanied by a burst of good press. Nearly three out of four evaluations of Perot were positive, the *Monitor* said. In addition, remarkably, according to the newsletter, Perot's overall "horse race" coverage (based on evaluations of his prospects) was 82 percent positive compared to 72 percent for Clinton and 57 percent for Bush. The networks' stories in April amounted to repeat introductions of the Perot "phenomenon."

3. A large part of Perot's "support" in polls always consisted of voter dissatisfaction.

The media did a poor job from the start of identifying overwhelming voter dissatisfaction in 1992 as a huge factor in the "support" that seemed to surface so quickly for Perot. He was, to some extent, a magnet for a "none of the above" vote. William Schneider, CNN commentator and columnist, wrote in a May 16 piece:

"Perot's vote is driven almost entirely by the other candidates' negatives...Perot's constituency is people who don't like either Bush or Clinton. Because both prospective nominees have unusually high negatives at this stage of the campaign, Perot is doing unusually well."³¹

It was significant, for instance, that candidates like Paul Tsongas, Jerry Brown, Pat Buchanan - each of whom was calling for major change in one way or another - struck some kind of a chord, each in their own way. In fact, when Tsongas withdrew from the race and then still drew 29 percent of the Democratic vote in the New York Primary, it seemed, indisputably, an expression of extreme dissatisfaction with the other candidates. *Newsday* reporter Susan Page, in response to a post-election survey by the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, said:

"One of the greatest shortcomings was our failure to understand and take seriously enough the candidacy of Ross Perot and what it signaled about the electorate. In the same vein, I think we were too willing to write off Paul Tsongas and Jerry Brown because they didn't seem to have a chance to win their party's nomination; in fact, both represented the same voter force we later saw in Perot."³²

John King, the AP's chief political correspondent, said in an interview that he felt the press was "absolutely" slow to connect the early support shown for Buchanan and Brown to the appeal of Perot.

Thomas Patterson, in his book, Out of Order, a study of the 1992 campaign, wrote:

"The first stories about the Ross Perot candidacy took little note of the public's alienation.... The press concentrated on Perot's personal wealth and ego, underplaying the fact that an outsider like Perot could have broad appeal only when people were angry at government."³³

Zaller's article attempted to analyze how Perot, with no background in politics, could rise to 20 percent in public opinion polls in March. An excerpt:

"When one is attempting to explain unexpected poll results, it is prudent to consider the possibility that what the polls are reporting is partly mirage. In the case of Perot's surprisingly strong showing in a three-way race against Bush and Clinton in late March, the possibility that needs to be considered is that this support was, to some extent, a diffuse protest vote for "none of the above," and, as such, an overstatement of both the level of support for Perot per se and the effects of his campaign activities thus far."

Zaller goes on to note that when the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* in late March found Perot at 16 percent and 21 percent respectively in a three-way race, *Newsweek* found that Jerry Brown attracted 18 percent in a poll. In addition, Zaller's article notes that in May, 1992, a *Times Mirror* poll found that General Norman Schwarzkopf got 29 percent in a hypothetical race with Bush and Clinton even though Schwarzkopf had expressed no interest in running for president. It stated:

"The most parsimonious explanation for the surprising support of Schwarzkopf, Brown and Perot is that, quite simply, 15 to 30 percent is the baseline level of support that any nationally known political figure would have been able to attract in a three-way race with Bush and Clinton at that point in the campaign." The *Times Mirror* Center survey said "the Schwarzkopf finding underscores the difficulty of judging how much of Perot's standing in the polls is really support for Perot rather than a yearning for a non-political alternative to Bush and Clinton."

Zaller's article adds that at the time of Perot's initially high poll numbers, both Bush and Clinton were enduring negative press, making Perot appear more like a "fresh face." His article stated:

"There is, moreover, firm evidence that some fraction of Perot's initial support was superficial at best. When, shortly after asking the presidential preference item, the *Times Mirror* poll asked respondents whether they had a favorable or unfavorable impression of Perot, 69 percent said they had insufficient basis for an impression, and 31 percent did have an impression. Most (but not all) of Perot's support in the presidential preference item came, as would be expected, from the 31 percent that did have an impression. But roughly 20 percent of Perot's total support on the

vote question came from people who confessed that they had too little information to have a favorable or unfavorable impression of him."³⁴

By the beginning of April, Perot was at 24 percent in one poll. By April 16, a *Wall Street Journal* / NBC poll had him at 26 percent; by April 26, he was getting 21 percent in a *New York Times* / CBS News poll.

4. Polls Were Even Less Meaningful Because a Very Large Percentage of Poll Respondents Didn't Know Who Perot Was

As Perot rose with amazing speed in polls during May and June, some polls taken asked people how much they knew about Perot and the replies were troubling. For example, a poll taken May 15-19 for NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*, found that 22 percent said they knew "nothing at all" about Perot; 30 percent said they knew "very little," 33 percent knew "some," 11 percent "quite a bit," and only 3 percent knew "a great deal."

Time's June 15th edition, which featured a cover story on Perot, published the results of its latest Yankelovich Clancy Shulman survey showing Perot leading Bush and Clinton. The survey asked respondents: "If the election for President were held today, would you vote for Bush, Clinton or Perot?" The results showed Perot with 37 % and Bush and Clinton tied, with 24 %. But, accompanying the story containing that poll data was a box headlined: "Perot the Front-runner." The box was apparently an attempt to explain the poll results a bit further. The article said that "a majority (53 percent) of Perot's supporters said they know little or nothing about Perot. One reason: he has not yet been forced to take firm stands on controversial issues. When his views become clear, Perot's popularity might well suffer."

If at least half the people responding to a survey about candidates say they know little or nothing about one of them, what worth does that survey have? John Stacks, *Time's* assistant managing editor, said in an interview he thought that box was an appropriate "disclaimer" to go

with the poll data. What Stacks didn't add is that *Time* was disseminating data that was not only limited in value, but misleading.

A CBS/*New York Times* poll in early June showed that 64 percent of the public had no idea where Perot stood on most issues. Even Ed Rollins, who served as one of Perot's campaign co-chairmen in June and July, 1992, said later that Perot "thought he was widely known...but the vast majority of Americans didn't have a clue who he was."³⁵

5. The media viewed Perot's exact standing in polls as an extremely important factor in deciding how much coverage to give him in April -a key turning point in the 1992 primary season.

The author, as part of a review of five news organizations' coverage of Perot from May 15 - June 15, interviewed representatives of each. One important topic in those interviews concerned their outlook toward Perot's poll standing during April, May & June and its impact on coverage. The following are very brief summaries of portions of those interviews.

1. Associated Press -- John King, the AP's chief political correspondent, said he did not believe that Perot's early poll numbers "would hold." He also said he thought "a lot of it was not about him," but, rather, reflected general voter dissatisfaction. In the early going, King said, "polls are all you have in that situation;" so, you have to pay some attention to them. Gradually, he said, the A.P took Perot's poll standing more seriously. In late April or early May, the AP made calls to various states and concluded there was real interest in Perot out there and began to take him more seriously. King said polls were only one of several factors the AP used to plan coverage. Between May 15 and June 15, the AP ran more than 200 different stories that included some coverage of Perot.³⁶

2. ABC News -- Hal Bruno, the network's political director, said "we would have been remiss had we not pointed out to people 'Watch out for this Ross Perot: He's going to have an

impact.'" Bruno said that polls were only one factor that led ABC to conclude Perot would have an impact. He said ABC "gave Perot an awful lot of coverage" of all kinds. Bruno also said he thought "polls are overdone. We use them too much and we use them too early. It's a tool. It's not an "end-all." He added "trial heat polls don't mean much until the fall. When you get into the fall campaign, people get more serious about who they're going to vote for." Nevertheless, about 45 percent of ABC's evening news stories that reported on Perot between May 15 - June 15, 1992 covered or mentioned his standing in polls or exit polls.³⁷

3. *Boston Globe* -- Christine Chinlund, the *Globe's* National Editor in 1992, said she was "a bit leery" of giving Perot a lot of serious attention in the earliest part of his undeclared campaign. She wanted to find out if, in fact, people really were responding to Perot before covering him more. Chinlund said "as a guy on his own, he didn't have a lot of standing," but that he tapped voters' disaffection. Polls were a contributing factor - not the only one - in weighing how to cover Perot, she said. "I think we were right to respond to polls," she said, adding polls are a great tool for learning what's on the public's mind. That Perot was rising in polls from April to May was important, she said. Had his poll standing lingered around 10 percent, the *Globe* might have exercised restraint in covering him for a longer time. (One way the *Globe* wisely showed restraint during the May 15 - June 15 period was to allot a great deal of its fairly extensive Perot coverage to columns on its editorial pages rather than predominantly to its news section when he was a "hot" - but speculative - story.)

4. *Time Magazine* -- John Stacks, *Time's* deputy managing editor in 1992, said Perot's poll standings were "undoubtedly important" in deciding how to cover him. "You didn't have to arrive at the conclusion that he was going to be president to feel he was going to be important." He acknowledged that media coverage can affect a candidate's poll rankings and that it's hard to tell

which comes first sometimes. He agreed Perot's specific level in polls was important and said, in response to a question: "Had Perot's poll standings been lower, he would have gotten less attention."

5. **WBZ TV** -- Bob Dumas, WBZ - TV's managing editor, said he thought polls were part of "a confluence of factors" that helped launch Perot in the spring of 1992. He said Perot was like a messenger for angry voters in a role similar to that played by John Silber in the 1990 Massachusetts gubernatorial election. He said WBZ covered Perot quite differently because he was an undeclared candidate who did not enter any primaries, adding that the station relied on the wire services, network feeds and other sources to cover Perot during the spring.³⁸

"If he had been at 10 percent in the polls in May, he would not have been on the nightly news," said Richard Noyes, Political Studies Director at the Washington-D.C. based Center for Media & Public Affairs, in an interview.

It is clear from these and other interviews that if Perot's exact poll standing had been 10 or so points lower - say closer to 10 percent instead of 20 - *these news organizations probably would have not covered him nearly as much in April and early May.* Should ten points in a public opinion poll - a flawed, hypothetical vehicle that attempts to "measure" the moving target of public attitudes and an exercise that pollsters admit is often extremely inaccurate when completed this far (five or six months) before the election - affect whether a large news organization like *Time* magazine gives significant coverage to a presidential candidate?

No. Of course not, but that's the way our system works. News organizations treat polling data very, very seriously and don't seem to even entertain the idea any more that the minute they stopped paying attention to polls, the polls' influence in elections would disappear. It is media coverage that gives polls their power.

After the New York primary, virtually every major news organization suddenly stepped up its coverage of Perot, but did so without really signaling to the public why he deserved so much more attention. The three networks had given no good, smooth or thorough introductions of Perot, and, overall, their stories suggested he had "come out of nowhere" or "suddenly caught fire." For example:

- *The Washington Post*, after running only a small March 19th item and a March 23rd introductory article, suddenly ran both a March 29th column by David Gergen assessing Perot's chances if he ran and a David Remnick profile of Perot. Just three weeks or so later, an April 19th column by George Will focused on whether Perot's candidacy could cause the election to be decided in the US House. In the days that followed, the coverage intensified to a near-constant level.

- ABC News, according to the ABC index, had not given any coverage to Perot in February or March. In fact, ABC's first coverage of Perot's '92 "campaign" came on Sunday, April 12, when, first, Perot's possible entry was discussed on *This Week with David Brinkley* with a discussion of whether Perot's possible entry into the race would hurt Bush or Clinton, and later, with a story on the evening news about his possible run and its impact.

On the 23rd, *Nightline* did a whole show on Perot. From about then on, ABC and the other networks reported on Perot regularly even though he remained a non-campaigning, non-candidate. For a good part of April, the content of stories focused on volunteers' efforts with the state ballot drives, his occasional comments, and, of course, his standing in the polls.

By May, Perot's standing in various polls had risen significantly, and, it was obvious that he had benefited from all the publicity of his previous poll rankings and the increased name recognition that resulted. There was an "absolute interplay" between the media coverage and his poll standing during this period, according to Professor Thomas Patterson. Often the print and television press seemed to attach immediate, enhanced value to Perot when his poll standing rose. For example, in a page one piece in the May 26th *New York Times*, a reporter said:

"...Mr. Perot last week became a credible Presidential contender, rising to the top of national and state polls. He has achieved this in the space of a few months and in a way never before even tried, bypassing party structure, the primary process

and traditional campaigning, traveling from oddity to viability exclusively on the strength of mass media exposure...he is the nation's first pure media Presidential contender."

A few days later, R.W. Apple, the respected veteran political reporter for the *New York Times*, wrote on Perot in another page one story for the newspaper's May 30th edition:

"...He has devised a kind of self-nominating process, rooted in appearances on television talk shows. And he has taken the lead in national opinion polls, something no other presidential hopeful outside the two party system has ever managed."

C. The press also devoted much undeserved attention to Perot's showing in exit polls, treating them as if they were as real and important as actual primary results.

By mid-May, the press was ready to seize on another form of polling that would give Perot even more legitimacy - exit polling. The AP, in fact, by already filing stories on exit polls in previous state primaries, was showing more interest in what might happen in the fall than what was happening in the present. For example, the AP did a May 30 story headlined "Primary Season Rushes Toward Finale With Perot Providing the Drama." The article stated:

"Perot has led both Bush and Clinton in Ohio and California polls. Exit surveys of voters in those and the other states will be watched as closely as Tuesday's results for hints of how voters view the presidential contest five months before Election Day."

The national media coverage of the last day of primary results, particularly California's, on June 2, 1992 was strikingly symbolic of the distorted description of Perot's noncandidacy. It was the day the largest, most delegate-rich state in the country was voting. Clinton and Bush each won big victories that day, but the television networks, and, to a considerably lesser extent, the daily newspapers, treated Perot's finish in exit polls like the salient news of the day and Perot as the day's "winner." Consider this excerpt from ABC News on the evening of June 2:

Peter Jennings, ABC News: Good evening. The long season of primary elections has finally come to an end. Nothing much turned out the way it was originally

intended. Later tonight, the world will know formally that Bill Clinton has won the right in the primary process to be his party's nominee. But neither Bill Clinton nor President Bush has any reason to feel secure tonight. There were primaries today in New Jersey, Ohio, Alabama, New Mexico, Montana and California. The polls are not closed in any of them yet, but the early picture of success, for today at least, is clear: it is Ross Perot.

Lynn Sherr, ABC News: Peter, the people who voted today tend to be party regulars - Democrats and Republicans who care enough about their candidates to turn up at the polls. But across the country, even they indicated a strong willingness to desert their party for the maverick campaign of H. Ross Perot. In Ohio, Alabama, and here in California, according to our exit polls if Perot had been on the ballot he might have done extremely well, even tying or beating Clinton and Bush in some cases. Among Democratic voters in California, Perot virtually ties Bill Clinton in a hypothetical race. And the same is true of Republican voters when Perot is pitted against George Bush. Again, keep in mind this is in response to a question we asked voters: Ross Perot is not on the ballot here. But when we combine the exit polling from both parties and ask about November, Perot actually beats both Clinton and Bush in California among these primary voters....³⁹

The Washington Post also played up Perot's finish in exit polls on June 2. The headline over two related stories was: "Clinton Secures Party Nomination; Perot Factor Grows, Exit Polls Show." One story titled "Bush Continues Unbeaten String Amid Discontent" began with this lead:

"Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton clinched the Democratic presidential nomination with cross-country primary victories yesterday, while President Bush continued his unbeaten string. But as the tumultuous primary season drew to a close, many voters said they were ready to reject both candidates and defect to Texas businessman Ross Perot. Perot was not on any ballot yesterday, but his appeal to a frustrated electorate, particularly evident in megastate California, underscored the continuing dissatisfaction with Bush and Clinton, even among voters loyal enough to participate in their party primaries."

Perot's finish in exit polls was treated as an important hurdle for Perot - like a task he had accomplished well. *The Boston Globe's* Martin Nolan, a veteran observer of campaigns, commented on these exit poll findings in a June 4, 1992 column:

"Herewith, a bulletin: Poll findings are not fact, but opinion...Many of those exit-pollled in Tuesday's final primaries said they wanted Ross Perot. But they said this

not in the declarative mood, but in the subjunctive mood. They would have, they could have, they might have voted this way or that, but the ballot was in black and white, a roster of reality, not the colorful hues of gaudy speculation.... This Someone Else guy always runs well and was beating the 1992 field in the Democratic primaries when his name was Mario Cuomo. Perot's puissance is based on the strength a subjunctive mood candidate enjoys until his declaration of candidacy, when he becomes just another politician."

Despite Nolan's realistic words, the press chose to view exit polls as a new "benchmark" for Perot and covered his totals in a dangerously similar way to actual vote totals for a primary. William Hamilton of the *Washington Post*, in a post-election survey to the Freedom Forum, said he thought polls were key for Perot.

"The polls made this guy credible without his ever having to go into a primary, run in a general election or go to a convention. We were put in a position of being forced to take him seriously without any of the normal sort of evidence one has about a candidacy going somewhere."⁴⁰

But, the press was not "forced" to do anything, and, in fact, chose to dwell on his poll ranking. E.J. Dionne, a *Washington Post* reporter, in a book chapter he wrote about the impact of polls, said Perot's rise and fall was "facilitated by national polls."

"...Once a public poll appeared showing Perot leading both President Bush and Bill Clinton, he became a contender on a par with the candidates who had struggled through a series of primaries to win their party nominations. In effect, national polls became a substitute for the entire party apparatus."⁴¹

By June, Perot averaged almost 60 stories a week in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* combined - a third of them on page one and a total more than twice the total for either Bush or Clinton, according to Rosenstiel. Dottie Lynch, the CBS' political unit, said:

"At CBS, Perot had convinced the network to become interested again in the campaign. After months in which we couldn't sell anything political for the nightly news, they fell in love with him.... He was rage. He was alienation."⁴²

D. The media downplayed and overlooked many truths and realities about Perot and his undeclared candidacy, including realities about its own role in "making" Perot a major candidate.

Though the media took the leading role in the spring of 1992 in driving Perot's pending candidacy, they almost never identified their own influence, and, instead, superimposed that onto others or into the narrative.

The May 25, 1992 edition of *Time* magazine is ripe with examples of the media's approach of leaving its own role out of the story. Perot's face was on the cover with the headline: "Waiting for Perot - He's Leading in the Polls, But Can He Lead the Nation?" The magazine's cover story contained the following excerpt:

"...At a time when Bush and Clinton are racing around the country, giving speeches, honing positions, posing against scenic backdrops, this small man, who loves the sobriquet "Billionaire Boy Scout," suddenly leads the polls. A *Time*/CNN survey last week by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman underlines Perot's surprising appeal: he wins a three-way race for the White House with 33 % to Bush's 28 %, with Clinton trailing at 24 %. Perot has done the impossible; crafted a credible national campaign out of two dozen TV interviews and half a dozen speeches."

It's extremely misleading, if not disingenuous to suggest that Perot did "the impossible" without the large, central role of the media, which was glad to heap attention to his non-campaign over and over. On the May 27th *Nightline*, Ted Koppel, in his introduction to a show on Perot, said:

"..Indeed, it does seem recently that the Bush and Clinton campaigns have been pushed to the national sidelines, while Mr. Perot, with relatively little effort and expense, considering the depth of his pockets, has turned himself into a highly visible, near-national obsession.... Swept along by the national mood of dissatisfaction, Mr. Perot has both his political opponents on the ropes and he hasn't even stepped into the ring." ⁴³

Surely, Ted Koppel knew then and knows now that Perot didn't "turn himself" into a national obsession. It was the media, and, in large part, the television media who did that. In fact, Koppel's show engaged in some good overkill of its own. Perot was the subject of 14 *Nightline* shows between April and November - more than any other candidate.⁴⁴

NBC also gave special attention to Perot by allowing the Texan two hours of time during special edition of the *Today Show* on June 11th when, a week earlier, NBC had refused to air President Bush's press conference.

Two weeks or so later, two days after the June 4th California primary, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page story with the following headline: "Perot's Presence Shapes a Race Like None in History." The story, by Thomas Edsall and Dan Balz, began like this:

"The 1992 general election campaign began yesterday under circumstances unprecedented in the nation's history. Not only has Ross Perot mounted the strongest independent presidential bid since Theodore Roosevelt bolted the Republican Party to run on the Bull Moose ticket in 1912, but the two major parties have lost their attraction to many voters and their nominees are held in lower esteem than at any time in several decades...."

Time out. Clearly, these reporters were alluding to Perot's poll standing as his great strength, which is a distortion in itself. Other newspapers and television news accounts repeatedly referred to Perot's movement in polls as if it constituted his most important behavior. Stories, for example, referred to Perot "stealing headlines" when a poll result prompted a response. For example, a May 28th *New York Times* article was headlined: "Clinton Is Knocked Off Course by Tide for Perot" and describes, simply, how Clinton was being forced to answer a lot of questions about Perot's latest poll standing.

IV. The Closing Chapter: Perot Showed He Was Unfit to be President, but the Media Did Little to Help Alert the Public to His Flaws

Whatever substantive reporting on Perot was done, it was spread out over months and buried amidst a barrage of horse race stories. Newspapers did a majority of this more substantive reporting, but, by June, 1992, the three networks also began to air more substantive, serious stories about Perot, especially his record. In October, the press was a bit slow to respond after his re-entry, but, eventually, did some substantive stories then too, including some that raised serious questions about Perot's judgment, character and readiness to be president. Nevertheless, it was too little, too late; the media failed to provide rigorous coverage that could have improved the public's understanding of Perot.

The following are several of the most glaring examples of the ways the press failed to report aggressively, hold Perot accountable and provide context in their stories:

- 1. The press never attempted to question or analyze the troubling contradictions in Perot's statements and actions pertaining to his July, 1992 decision to not run.**

Perot said one reason he didn't want to run was that he had decided that he could no longer win the election and he didn't want to have a three-way race go to the US House of Representatives. Perot also said suddenly that he thought the Democratic Party had revitalized itself. "They've done a brilliant job in my opinion, in coming back,' he said," the *New York Times* reported.

- 2. The press failed to report on Perot's activities in context during the summer period when he was out of the race.**

Only days following his July decision not to run, Perot was giving mixed signals about the status of his volunteers' efforts to place his name on state ballots around the country. As of July 16, he was on the ballot of 24 states.

On August 19, *CBS Evening News* reported that Perot, only a month or so after he'd quit his undeclared campaign, was thinking again about running for president. The report, by Correspondent Scott Pelley, said that "Perot says that he does not want to run, but might be forced to if the two established parties do not propose what he calls 'hard-minded' solutions to the nation's economic problems." The report, after quoting Perot, said absolutely nothing about how he had left his campaign in July.

The news media's coverage of Perot's drawn-out process for considering a return lacked any context, and, in summary, acted as if Perot's first campaign and strange "withdrawal" had not occurred. In fact, when Perot requested that representatives of the Clinton and Bush campaigns come see him in Dallas as he weighed whether to return, the sequence of events was treated as major news. So, the country got to see a pathetic display of Bush and Clinton representatives begging for Perot's support while the press just sat by - relaying the "drama" - without reminding people who was who and what was what.

Some of Perot's statements about why he was contemplating a return were very troubling - if not completely disingenuous. For example, he said once that the networks would require him to be a candidate if he wanted to buy time to discuss his ideas. But ABC's Morton Dean checked into this claim and found that, in fact, Perot could have easily bought time on local stations or independent stations or cable if he wanted to.

3. The press failed to report well on Perot's re-entry on Oct. 1

During the last week of September, the networks and print media devoted a lot of attention to speculation about whether Perot would re-enter the race. While news organizations immediately focused on Perot's impact on the horse race, virtually no news organization spent much time raising questions about how and why Perot would want to re-enter a race he had so

clearly rejected in July. Indeed, if he felt the Democratic Party was "revitalized" in July, how could it not be on October 1? The press didn't push Perot to answer that or any related questions about his motivations or explain why he should be taken seriously. In fact, with Perot's inconsistency in Phase 1, one could conclude that it was concern with readership and ratings that drove news organizations to cover him.

Making matters worse, participants and observers agree, many news organizations weren't as likely to investigate Perot during this second phase of his 1992 campaign - even though he'd escaped scrutiny the first time - because, then, he had too low a poll standing to warrant close examination and assignment of resources. Once again, polls drove decision making.

A related note: With a lower poll rating now than when he withdrew, it's quite clear that without the extraordinary media coverage he received in the spring, Perot probably would have not been asked to participate in the debates with Bush and Clinton.

4. The press didn't emphasize enough Perot's story about assassins trying to kill him and his family - a story that said a lot about his character.

ABC Correspondent Morton Dean put together a story that aired in October challenging Perot's longtime claim that the North Vietnamese government in 1970 or 1971 had hired the Black Panthers as assassins to try to kill him and his family at their home in Dallas. Perot had told the story for 20 years and mentioned it in congressional testimony. But Dean found no one who could confirm anything about Perot's story, including three individuals to whom Perot suggested Dean speak about the incident for confirmation.⁴⁵

5. Though the press reported the important story in October concerning Perot's accusations about the Republicans' sabotaging his daughter's wedding, they could have done a better job reporting on the side of his character revealed here.

The October 25th edition of *60 Minutes* featured a segment on Perot that was explosive. The segment was about Perot's charges that the Republican campaign had planned to sabotage his

daughter's August 23rd wedding. Perot suddenly was saying that when he heard about this plot, it had prompted him to withdraw from the race last July. This contradicted his earlier reasons given for withdrawing. He said later that he'd dropped out to prevent his daughter from being humiliated at a potential disruption of her wedding, mentioning he'd heard from three people that one tactic would involve doctoring a photograph of his daughter and giving it to a supermarket magazine. He also said that Republican operatives had planned to wiretap his office.

Perot acknowledged he had no evidence to prove any of these charges. However, on October 25, Perot told a rally of supporters that while he couldn't prove what happened, "it was a risk I could not take." And, while Perot seemed to accept White House denials of any involvement, he also did not retract the charges at a Oct. 26th press conference.⁴⁶

On the night after Perot's press conference, an NBC News correspondent said: "Perot's bizarre allegations raise more questions about his character, his truthfulness, and fitness to be president." CBS News consultant Joe Klein said Perot's performance at the press conference "raises doubts again whether this guy has the temperament to be president of the United States."⁴⁷ Both were right, but there were only nine days before the election. Now, the *60 Minutes* disclosure - which Perot brought on himself - had forced news organizations to stop ignoring this subject. Elizabeth Drew of the *New Yorker* wrote in the November 16, 1992 edition:

"... Perot's "bizarre interview with *60 Minutes* nine days before the election and his temper tantrum at a press conference the next day showed aspects of his nature that he had kept hidden since he re-entered - the signs of paranoia, and even delusion, and his temperament, which made him ill-suited to the ruggedness of politics, not to mention the presidency."

The problem, which we've seen again recently with coverage of Colin Powell, is that the media can become so obsessed with entertaining its audience that it loses its own direction and distorts its own purpose.

V. Ten Recommendations to the Media for A New Approach in 1996

- 1. Shorten and reduce the coverage of presidential campaigns so that the most substantive information is reported to the public in the period immediately before primaries and the general election.**

Often print and television media have run some of their best stories on candidates early in the election season when many people miss them. People do not begin to focus on the presidential race until during the election year; therefore, news organizations should concentrate their coverage in that period and abandon much of its coverage in the calendar year preceding the election.

- 2. Don't cover individuals before they announce their candidacy.**

There are enough other things to cover rather than engage in more speculation about "possible candidates" and "probable candidates" The content of these speculative stories often doesn't give people much real hard information, so why not just wait a bit longer? Ross Perot was the ultimate example of a "possible" candidate manipulating the press into giving him free attention without adequate scrutiny.

- 3. Do much more reporting on candidates' records in past elective office or other jobs. It is often the very best indicator of what kind of president a person may be.**

The value of the press providing this information cannot be overstated. When one looks back on the performance of past presidents, one can usually find the "clues" or indicators by studying their performance in past positions. When a candidate like Perot has not served in elective office, this reporting takes on even more importance, and, it must be done from the beginning.

- 4. Always keep seeking details on candidates' positions and proposals, and, when candidates fail to provide answers, share this with your readers and viewers with appropriate emphasis.**

Providing a clear sense of a candidate's philosophy, principles and positions is obviously important. Unfortunately, often some of the best reporting on positions comes long before the public is paying attention. Television news and newspapers should find ways to run or air "repeat versions" of these stories in the days immediately preceding the election.

- 5. Try to share any meaningful observations of candidates' character that might be useful and interesting to voters.**

Like it or not, under the current system, the press has the important role of "screening" candidates and acting as a "surrogate" for the people in that regard. The press sometimes does a much better job acquainting us with one candidate than another. In 1992, the press, particularly television news, did about the worst job imaginable in giving us a sense of Ross Perot's character. By the time more stories on Perot's background came out, their impact was diminished.

- 6. News organizations should free up reporters to do more interpretive reporting.**

There is a great irony with the media's current approach. Reporters go out on the campaign trail and spend a lot of time with candidates, but then they become preoccupied with poll stories rather than sharing their best insights and observations of candidates with the voters. Yes, there should still be good, factual news reporting on what candidates say and do. However, if reporters are allowed and encouraged to do more observation and analysis of candidates' words and actions, their stories will give us a better sense of "what makes them tick."

- 7. Make coverage of daily campaigning mean something again by reporting longer "sound bites" or excerpts from candidates and asking them to explain the meaning of their speeches or remarks.**

Voters hear a lot of sound bites that often remain un-explained on the evening news.

Reporters should ask candidates to elaborate rather than accepting and reporting excerpts from vague rhetoric.

- 8. Try - just once - to not cover polls nearly so much and you'll bring automatic improvement to the entire process of choosing a president.**

The media has not followed through on its promises to cut back in poll coverage.

Preoccupation with polls has done a lot of damage to American politics. It has created a distance between candidates and citizens and blurred the line between speculation and reality. Real votes should always mean much more than polling data. Perot's amazingly rapid climb in the polls was unprecedented for an independent candidate. Yet, he achieved all this without people really knowing him. Poll results alone should never mean so much again.

- 9. Devote more time to holding candidates accountable for their statements and inform the public of contradictions and incomplete or false statements.**
- 10. Try to emphasize the priority of informing the public rather than simply entertaining or pleasing the public.**

Good coverage of a presidential campaign cannot include lively, dramatic content every day. Sometimes, in fact, the best reporting is in-depth substantive research on a candidate's background that requires patience and attention from the audience. The media should persist in reporting on the tough, complicated, difficult issues of a campaign -- talking up to readers and viewers, not down.

V. End Notes

In addition to those people quoted in this report, the following people were among those interviewed:

Gregory Payne, professor of communication studies, Emerson College; Jim Glaser, professor, political science, Tufts University; Michael Hagan, professor, political science, Harvard University; Tobe Berkovitz, professor, Communications, Boston University; Daniel Hallin, professor, communications, University of California at San Diego; Peter Elkind, editor of *Dallas Observer*; John Zaller, professor, political science, UCLA; Thomas Patterson, professor, political science, Syracuse University; Kiku Adatto, writer & cultural analyst; Stephen Ansolabehere, professor, political science, M.I.T.; Mark Jurkowitz, ombudsman, *Boston Globe*; Kathleen Kendall, professor, SUNY-Albany; Howard Kurtz, *Washington Post*; Larry Sabato, professor, University of Virginia and Tim Cook, professor, Williams College.

Also, the author obtained and reviewed videotape copies of television, newspaper and wire service coverage of Ross Perot from May 15 - June 15, 1992 for the following five news organizations: 1) ABC News from Vanderbilt University's television archive; 2) *Boston Globe* - microfilm copies; 3) *Time Magazine* - copies in library; 4) WBZ-TV - Copy of tape from Video Newswatch; and, 5) AP - Copy of 200-300 stories retrieved in search using Dialogue at UMass Boston Library

- ¹ *Television News Index & Abstracts*, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University.
- ² *The Beat Goes On - President Clinton's First Year With the Media* by Tom Rosenstiel, 1994, Twentieth Century Fund, Inc.
- ³ *Boston Globe*, June 14, 1995.
- ⁴ *American Journalism Review*, article in September, 1994 edition.
- ⁵ *The New York Times Magazine*, article in June 26, 1994 edition.
- ⁶ From Carl Bernstein remarks at Theodore White Seminar sponsored by the Shorenstein Center on Press, Politics & Public Policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government on November 15, 1991.
- ⁷ *Strange Bedfellows - How Television and the Presidential Candidates Changed American Politics* by Tom Rosenstiel, 1994 Hyperion.
- ⁸ *Edited for Television - CNN, ABC and the 1992 Presidential Campaign* by Matthew Kerbel, 1994, Westview Press

- ⁹ "Report of the Markle Commission on the Media & the Electorate, Summary of Key Findings, May 6, 1990
- ¹⁰ Interview with Richard Noyes, June 1, 1995
- ¹¹ *Washington Post*, March 19, 1992.
- ¹² *Time* magazine, May 25, 1992
- ¹³ *New York Times*, July 17, 1992
- ¹⁴ *Newsweek*, April 27, 1992
- ¹⁵ Transcript of ABC's *Nightline* April 23, 1992
- ¹⁶ Edited for Television, Kerbel
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Strange Bedfellows, Rosenstiel
- ¹⁹ "The Media, the Public & the Development of Candidates' Images in the 1992 Presidential Election," by Dean Alger. A Research Paper published by the Shorenstein Center on Press & Politics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.
- ²⁰ Transcript of *60 Minutes*. March 29, 1992.
- ²¹ "The Rise and Fall of Candidate Perot," an article by UCLA Professor John Zaller with Mark Hunt in January March, 1995 edition of *Political Communication*, a journal.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Transcript of CBS Evening News, March 20, 1992.
- ²⁴ "The Finish Line: Covering the Campaign's Final Days," a special election report published January, 1993 by the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University.
- ²⁵ Dirty Politics by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 1992, Oxford University Press.
- ²⁶ *Columbia Journalism Review* article by James Boylan in November/December 1992 edition.
- ²⁷ "Press, Polls and the 1988 Campaign: An Insider's Critique" by Dayton Duncan, article published by Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics & Public Policy.
- ²⁸ Interview with Peter Hart, June 9, 1995.

- ²⁹ Strange Bedfellows, Rosenstiel.
- ³⁰ Interview with Lee C. Shapiro, Voter News Service, June, 1995.
- ³¹ *National Journal*, article in May 16, 1992 edition.
- ³² Freedom Forum report.
- ³³ Out of Order by Thomas Patterson, 1993, Alfred Knopf, Inc.
- ³⁴ This and preceding excerpts from Zaller article.
- ³⁵ Transcript of *Nightline*, August 14, 1992.
- ³⁶ From a review of all A.P. stories covering Perot from May 15 - June 15, 1992.
- ³⁷ From a review of ABC nightly news stories covering Perot from May 15 - June 15, 1992.
- ³⁸ Interviews with Bob Dumas of WBZ TV; John King of A.P.; Christine Chinlund of the Boston Globe; John Stacks of *Time* magazine; Hal Bruno of ABC News, May & June, 1995
- ³⁹ Transcript of "World News Tonight" June 2, 1992.
- ⁴⁰ Freedom Forum report.
- ⁴¹ Media Polls in American Politics edited by Thomas Mann & Gary Orren, 1992, Brookings Institution.
- ⁴² Strange Bedfellows, Rosenstiel.
- ⁴³ Transcript of May 27, 1992 edition of *Nightline*.
- ⁴⁴ *Television News Index & Abstracts*, 1992 editions, Vanderbilt University.
- ⁴⁵ Strange Bedfellows, Rosenstiel.
- ⁴⁶ Transcript of "60 Minutes," October 25, 1992 and articles in *Washington Post* October 26 & 27, 1992.
- ⁴⁷ *New Republic*, Nov. 16, 1992 edition.

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A Transcript of the Proceedings of the March 6, 1992, Fifth Annual Seminar, Rx for Recovery: Planned Growth in a Protected Environment. Seminar arranged by Kathleen Foley and Ian Menzies and presented by the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, UMass Boston.

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